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# OREGON SPEECHWAYS

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FOR NEARLY half a century after the first migration of 1839, the Oregon country—that region from which the states of Washington, Idaho, and Oregon have been created—remained in comparative isolation, reached only by long, tedious journeys by sea or overland trail. Population increased slowly until the completion of the transcontinental railroads in 1883, and then the area north of the Columbia River received the bulk of the growth. As a result, Washington emerged rapidly with a mixed group of settlers, but Oregon, south of the river, continued to develop only slowly, so that its folkways and speechways, brought in originally by a homogeneous people, tended to remain largely unchanged and to dominate and reduce later groups to the established pattern.

When the first American settlers arrived they found already existing in the Oregon country a language that was at least in part English. This was the Chinook Jargon, a means of communication between the white traders and the Indians and among the various groups of Indians themselves. The Jargon came to be understood and used by tribes from northern California to Alaska and flourished in any area where whites and Indians met in trade or settlement. Where or when the Jargon developed is a matter of sharp dispute. One faction maintains that the Jargon grew up among the Indians before the coming of the white men and resulted from the need for a commonly understood language in native trade between coastal and inland tribes. The other faction holds that the Jargon came into existence only after the coming of white traders late in the eighteenth century and was the creation of the whites and the Indians engaged in the fur trade. Both sides ultimately rest their argument upon an equivocal statement in John Jewitt's *Adventures*, that the Indians 'have two languages, one for their songs, and one for common use.' The honors would seem to rest with the second faction.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever its origin, the Jargon prospered and flourished as a medium for the exchange of ordinary and simple ideas between speakers of dif-

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1. Those who argue for native Indian development are best represented by Chester A. Fee, 'Oregon's Historical Esperanto—the Chinook Jargon,' *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, XLII (June, 1941), 176-85, and Edward H. Thomas, *Chinook: a History and Dictionary* (Portland, 1935); the opposition was led by the late and sometimes irascible Judge F. H. Howay, 'Origin of the Chinook Jargon on the Northwest Coast,' *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, XLIV (March, 1943), 26-55.

ferent native languages. At heart the Jargon was Indian, a mixture of verbs, modifiers, and a collection of nouns from Indian languages like Nootka, Tillamook, and Chinook. Indian nouns named natural features and objects characteristic of native life and experience. Upon it were imposed words drawn from Canadian-French and from English. French nouns named commonplace objects, like guns, clothing, domestic animals, familiar to the common laborers and trappers of the fur companies but new to the Indians. English words similarly were those referring to the trade and to objects and concepts natural to the factors, clerks, and later the overland settlers. There were some inconsistencies; thus the Jargon word for *fire* was *piah*, from the English originally, and the word for Indian was *siwash*, from the French *sauvage*.<sup>2</sup>

Structurally, the Jargon was extremely simple. It had no conjugations, no declensions, no tenses, no gender, no number. For meaning it depended purely upon word order and syntax. Prolongation of a main vowel intensified meaning; thus *tyee* meant chief, *hyas tyee* a big chief, but *hya-a-a-s tyee* a very great chief or politician. With such limitations, the Jargon had to resort to complicated circumlocutions in order to express what, to the white men, were simple ideas. In order to convey the idea of the English noun *butcher*, the speaker of Jargon arrived in the general vicinity of the meaning by saying *man yaka cumtux mammook memaloose moosmoos*—literally, 'man he knows how to make dead cows.'

Words in Chinook therefore frequently represented only general concepts and took specific meaning partly from context and partly from the occasion or surrounding situation; translations of published Chinook texts are unsatisfactory unless the exact purpose or occasion for them is known. The hymns, published by Myron Eells, are clear enough, but a burlesque poem written in the Jargon and published in the *Oregon Spectator* during 1851 to fit a topical situation defies adequate interpretation. Though complex ideas were difficult to communicate in the Jargon, simple ideas, directions, and bargaining might adequately be managed, and good speakers talked fluently, supplying English words when the Jargon itself was inadequate. Ultimately, a hundred thousand people spoke it throughout the Oregon country, and it continues as a living language even today wherever large groups of Indians live in remote sections where meetings with white men are only infrequent, as in the Cariboo country of British Columbia. Farther south, the Jargon died out by the beginning of the twentieth century and survives only in isolated words.

2. The development of *siwash* is seen in two uses found in the *Oregon Spectator*; in 1850 it appeared as *Souwash*, in 1853 as *Siwash*.

The Jargon represents the original groups of people in the country: Indians, French-Canadians, and British and American traders, the last two groups being associated with the operations of the Hudson's Bay Company. Next to arrive as a group were the few but very vocal American missionaries, shortly followed by American merchants, both mainly from New England and New York and speaking the dialects of that part of the United States. Finally came the overland emigrants who by 1843 greatly outnumbered all other groups and were most strongly to influence and determine the speechways of the region. They avoided the infant towns and took up large tracts under the Donation Land Claims Act so that their households were isolated and their settlements thinly scattered over the length and breadth of a huge area. During the first decades of settlement, as a result, close social intercourse and means of intercommunication remained difficult, as did means of travel to California or the States.<sup>3</sup> Language habits, under such conditions, became fixed and remained singularly free from outside influence.

A majority of the emigrants came from a single region in the States—that section closely bordering the Ohio and Tennessee rivers and extending west into Missouri and southern Illinois. If they had not been born in that region, they had stopped over for about a year in Missouri or newly settled Iowa before setting out for Oregon. And even those who came directly from New England and New York tended, once they settled in Oregon, to marry women from Missouri.<sup>4</sup> Coming as they did from an area already unified in its speech habits, they brought with them quite naturally those turns of phrase and idioms and accents and established them in the Willamette Valley. What their speechways were can be determined by an examination of their writings. On the whole they were a literate and sometimes wordy group, spelling with sufficient inattention to the niceties of Webster's blue-back so that their pronunciation was indicated. In their letters, their diaries, and their newspapers they made use of phrases and words characteristic either of their home region or

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3. The word *States* as used in Oregon referred specifically to the United States east of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. It is found as early as 1839 in Oregon writings, continued in use throughout the period, and remains with the more general meaning of the continental United States. Students from Hawaii use it frequently to mean the Pacific Coast; see also the Eugene (Oregon) *Register-Guard*, August 21, 1949, where the word refers to the nation as a geographic entity.

4. Many writers of the time and shortly later mention the large Missouri contingent among the settlers and the Missouri habits of speech. An unpublished study of the Census of 1850, prepared by David C. Duniway, State Archivist of Oregon, reveals the concentration by section of the origins of the emigrants. At the Constitutional Convention of 1857, half of the membership had come from either Missouri or Illinois, while only one sixth were from New York or New England.

of the necessities of their new surroundings. Sometimes their newspapers indicated dialect words, phrases, or proverbs by italics, quotation marks, or comment—as Oregon papers still do—but sometimes they used them without apology and apparently without recognition. One such newspaper can be considered representative: the *Oregon Spectator*, founded in 1846, the first on the Pacific Coast. According to the announcement at its masthead, the *Spectator* was ‘devoted to the Moral, Social, Literary, Political and Agricultural Interests of the People of Oregon,’ and therefore was not likely to descend to the crudities of commonplace speech; but as it was also, though not openly, devoted to the interests of the merchant group and opposition to the Hudson’s Bay Company, it could forget its high-flown intentions when the going became rough and carry in its columns a wide assortment of regional and dialect terms, sometimes indicated, sometimes not.<sup>5</sup> Now and then the editor sneered at the vulgarity of his upstart rivals like the *Oregon Statesman* and the *Oregonian* and was constantly tetchy at the condescension of San Francisco papers which sneered at the Oregon papers for their use of terms from Chinook Jargon. In return, he jeered, with considerable justice, at the San Franciscan’s free use of bad Spanish, responding by printing in the Jargon a satiric parody of *Hiawatha*.

Dialect in the *Spectator* forms three groups: indicated nonstandard pronunciations and words, terms from the Jargon, and terms clearly regional. Pronunciations like *cheer*, *drother*, *fortin*, *garden sars*, *idee*, *kittle*, *Ioway*, and *Californey* reflect the background of the settlers, as do terms like *absquatulate*, *blue-devils*, *cross-timber*, *dog-cheap*, *fixins*, *nary*, *right jam to*, and *right smart*. From the Jargon, words like *cumtux*, *ictas*, *muckamuck*, and *tillicum* frequently appeared. Local conditions affected the language as new objects, and new processes required new words, such as *bacqueros*, *corral*, *butte*, *diggins*, *emigrant*, and *canyon*. New activities called for new means of expression: ‘The California company will commence rendezvousing on the Rickreall River the first of June.’<sup>6</sup> An emigrant party, meeting the hardships of the trail, is described as ‘seated at a meal of soup and horse-beef.’<sup>7</sup> The ‘mountain man’ is mentioned as a type, and mountain men sometimes signed themselves with the term when

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5. In addition, a generous amount of dialect is found in the exchanges, clipped from Eastern papers like the *Spirit of the Times* and the *Yankee Blade*. In this study only the original material of the local news, editorial, and advertising columns has been considered.

6. *Oregon Spectator*, May 28, 1846. For a discussion of the name ‘Rickreall’ and its probable origin, see the *Spectator* for September 23, 1851.

7. *Oregon Spectator*, March 4, 1854.

writing to the editor. The proud phrase *Old Oregonian* quickly appears and reflects the tightly knit society of the region; in 1850, when the *Spectator* used the term, it meant one who had arrived before the migration of 1846; by 1854 it more generously meant anyone 'of five years' residence.'<sup>8</sup>

A pattern of development appeared in the *Spectator*. All through the period of settlement, both the geography and the climate required the pioneer to make use of new words. Coming across the trail, he had been forced to reorient himself. He had encountered new varieties of weather and had named a warm, thawing wind the 'Chinook' and a cold one the 'Walla Walla.' He passed 'buttes' and 'canyons'; he found his trails avoiding 'swales,' usually recognized by their blanket of blue 'camas.' When he settled, he made use of new phrases for directions. Thus, in the Willamette Valley, the settler went 'out South' or 'up South,' reflective of his travel along the river to the 'up country' on the tributaries and headwaters. From Eugene on the Willamette or Lewiston on the Snake he went 'down to Portland,' by the river, as he still tends to describe a journey to the metropolis. If he went to central Oregon, he went 'in'; returning, he came 'out.' To leave Prineville in the high country of central Oregon, or to leave Newport on the coast, was 'to go outside,' indicative of the isolation of those places. Though, as transportation improved, such usages largely disappeared, they occasionally find echo, as in the news story published in the Portland *Oregonian* on June 6, 1949, that described a heat wave by saying, 'South of the border it was really hot, with 104 degrees at Red Bluff.'

Phrases may drop from use when conditions change. No longer heard is *old land*, though *pole barn* and *pole corral* still describe forms of construction. Sometimes terms develop new forms or meanings. The English phrase *barrow-pit* is common in road-making, to mean the ditch or excavation beside a roadway; frequently it shortens to *bar-pit* in the same meaning, and occasionally the meaning is extended, evidently through a Western folk etymology, to include any excavation made for the purpose of securing fill material. So *barrow-pit* is used to describe the sources of material for an earth-fill dam. The effect of varying local conditions upon meaning and usage can be illustrated by three examples: *webfoot*, *varmint*, and *buck*. The first, used both as a noun and an adjective to

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8. Later development of the term continues to show the same close local society; Frances Fuller Victor said that in 1850 it was 'synonymous with Pioneer.' Current usage makes it refer to one who is born in Oregon and a descendant of emigrants over the Trail. A local saying is that 'an Old Oregonian is anyone born in Yamhill County to parents from Missouri.'

mean Oregon or Oregonian, evidently replaced generally even less flattering descriptions of the people and place, like *lop-ears*, used by the Californians in 1848-49.<sup>9</sup> In 1851 the *Spectator* used the term in a kind of anticipation of the later meaning, but *webfoot* in general seems not to have been used until after 1860; some writers say it originated in California, and probably it did, as no love was lost between the settlers of the two states. Frances Fuller Victor cites a story to explain its origin, a story plausible enough though probably pure folklore.<sup>10</sup> In 1862 an Oregon diarist casually described Portland as 'the big town of the Webfoot nation,' a use not unlike that in the *Golden Era*, published in San Francisco, where it appeared in combination with *Blackfoot*, the latter meaning Montana. Another diarist shows its conventional use by writing 'the old water-soaked pioneer that is rightly styled Webfoot.'<sup>11</sup> In the plural form, *webfoots*, the term is applied to the athletic teams of the State University. While a similar use of the regular plural has been noted in Wallowa County, where the plural of *foot* becomes *footses*, and while a similar use is occasionally heard in the vulgate speech of western Oregon, the form used by the university reflects not so much folk speechways as the ingenuity of the publicity department which by insisting upon the form stirred up considerable controversy and attention. Whether the athletic office knew of the ordinary plural spelling is a matter of discussion and occasional dispute in local academic circles.

The second term, *varmint*, is familiar, though shunned by the formal and defined as a dialectal form of *vermin*. In the *Spectator* it was used to mean any wild or troublesome animal, such as a wolf, and since then it has been applied to such critters as hornets, polecats, coyotes, cougars, bears, gophers, and Indians. Today it ordinarily refers to troublesome predatory beasts, like bobcats, coyotes, and cougars, and is in regular use by Oregon newspapers. In 1948 the Portland *Oregonian* described a man as the 'state varmint hunter,' and the smaller papers occasionally carry classified advertisements offering 'varmint hounds' for sale. Its current use reflects the existence of great tracts of forest and desert land, only thinly settled.

The third is *buck*. As a noun it means or has meant a male Indian,

9. H. H. Bancroft, *History of Oregon* (San Francisco, 1886), I, 19. It can be noted that the use of *hard case* as a nickname for Oregonians, cited by Walt Whitman and since frequently mentioned, apparently was rare to nonexistent on the Pacific Coast.

10. F. F. Victor, *All Over Oregon and Washington* (San Francisco, 1872), 180.

11. See *Golden Era* (San Francisco), December 10, 1865. The quotation is from Eli S. Glover, *Diary* (November 27, 1875), p. 27.

a kind of fish, a breeding ram, a worker whose task is to lift and carry, and a cowboy—the last a shortening of *buckaroo*, which had appeared as *bacquero* in the *Spectator* in 1847. In central Oregon, *buck* is the regular term for anyone who herds cattle. Experienced hands refer to themselves as ‘old bucks’ or occasionally ‘waddies’ and reserve *cowboy* as a somewhat contemptuous description of transient workers on cattle ranches. A student described the help employed during fall roundup on her father’s ranch as ‘three old bucks and some cowboys.’ As a verb, *buck* means an animal’s frantic actions in attempts to unseat a rider; to breed sheep; to play or gamble, as ‘to buck at monte’; to carry objects, especially sacks in connection with combining wheat;<sup>12</sup> and to saw felled trees into logs. All meanings are in common use.

*Buck*, it will be noticed, is a term used in four occupational lingos: fishing, wheat growing, cattle raising, and lumbering, the industries which most largely influence the economy of Oregon. Each of the industries has a vocabulary of its own, but most widely known, and probably most picturesque, is that of lumbering. Whenever large groups of workers are involved in an industry, they develop a jargon, in part slang, in part homely metaphor, in part technical description, and so it has been with the lumber industry. Many terms along with place names came to the Pacific Coast as logging moved through cuttings westward from Maine, Minnesota, and Mississippi, so that frequently terms of logging are general rather than local, though they may be altered to meet conditions in the Pacific Coast forests. Thus, among the Southern pineries and swamp cuttings, a ‘peckerwood’ is a small, self-contained sawmill built upon a barge or sled and moved from place to place as yarding requires. A shift in the industry from the South to Oregon that occurred in the late 1930s brought the word along, but in Oregon, *peckerwood* came to mean any small, independent mill, sawing only a few thousand feet of lumber a day in marginal stands. In Lane County, at least, the variant form *peckerpole* also came into use. A peckerwood mill may be a ‘gyppo outfit,’ though usually *gyppo* refers to independent contract logging rather than to the size of the mill and was introduced as a term of disparagement by the Industrial Workers of the World.<sup>13</sup> The familiar cry of the logger, *Timber!*, given as a warning before the fall of a tree, was

12. The verb *to combine*, meaning to cut, thresh, and sack wheat in a single operation, in speech takes the accent on the first syllable.

13. So defined by Nelson C. Brown, *Logging* (New York, 1949), p. 55; see also Richard G. Lillard, *The Great Forest* (New York, 1948). Louis Jackson, *A Vocabulary of Criminal Slang* (Portland, 1914), records *gyp* as noun and verb, but not *gyppo*.

another importation and replaced the cry *Under!*, from *Stand from under!*, that was common around Puget Sound logging shows in 1870.<sup>14</sup> Recently the use of *Timber!* in warning has declined with a shift in operational methods that removed from the woods all workers but the team actually engaged in felling. In some camps there has been a tendency among fallers to expand the call into an elaborate and very complicated chant that gives the hearers an idea of the direction and type of fall to expect and the faller a chance to show his own verbal skill.<sup>15</sup> Many terms used by loggers are similar to those used by railroaders, probably because logging once depended upon a network of railroads manned by 'boomers' and 'broken-necked swans' who used the lingo of railroading and introduced it to the woods. So *crummy*, the railroader's unflattering description of his caboose or crew-car, appeared on logging railroads and then became the logger's word to mean any railroad car or motorbus used to transport workers to and from the cuttings. In advertising it sometimes appears as *crumbie*.

From the woods, logging terms spread into common use in the region. Phrases from the cuttings become phrases in the towns and are used by everyone, whether or not directly associated with the industry. A dead tree or limb is a 'widow maker' and a forked tree a 'schoolma'am.' No longer are logs hauled to the mill along a 'skid road,' but the term survives to mean the cheap flophouse district of a city, and the variant form 'skid row' is roundly censured as a careless and ignoble form. College men, like loggers, wear 'tin pants' but do not 'stag' them, fortunately. Housewives, laying in winter fuel, speak glibly of the respective merits of 'green slab,' 'block,' 'second growth,' 'edgings,' and 'pond lilies.' The local newspaper at Eugene, Oregon, without comment advertised for sale 'two cats and one donkey for winter road show,' but no one confused it with an animal entertainment. The lumber industry has in its verbal menagerie *bulls*, *dogs*, *gophers*, *hodags*, *mules*, *monkeys*, *hogs*, *snakes*, *squirrels*, *snipes*, *straddlebugs*, and *fir lice*, and in his expansive moments the logger himself becomes a 'timber beast.' Fir lice trouble anyone who handles wood; they are the minute splinters of the soft bark that penetrate the skin. A logging superintendent is proud to be a 'bull-of-the-woods,' but a flunky or chore-boy around a camp is not happy to be a 'bull-cook.' Anything complicated or puzzling is a 'molly-hogan.' Logs, boards, sticks,

14. Capt. C. M. Scammon, 'Lumbering in Washington Territory,' *Overland Monthly*, V (July, 1870), 57.

15. This use of the chant is reported from Westfir, Oregon. As the chant is used occasionally, it probably reflects the general dropping of the warning cry and may be merely a show of exuberance.

anything that turns edgewise and jams against an obstruction, are said to 'jill-poke.' Any Oregonian, at home with such terms, and with others like them from wheat growing and fishing, speaks a various language, not always wholly intelligible to the stranger in his midst.

The words and phrases may give the stranger pause, but the pronunciation generally does not. It is General American, stemming as it does mainly from Ohio Valley speech of the first half of the nineteenth century, but it does retain some coloration of its origin. In the state, three speech areas are distinguishable. One, a long narrow strip along the Willamette River, reaches from Portland to Eugene and includes the area in which growth through the years has been heaviest, with large groups coming to it from various parts of the United States. It is hardly marked by distinguishing turns of speech, except a tendency among those of birth or long residence in the region to speak very slowly and to give a very slight rounding to the vowels *a* and *o*, and to close the *e* and *i*, but nothing so distinct as to be immediately apparent to a newcomer. Around the Willamette River area and including the fringes of the valley and the Coast Range country is a second speech area in which the same characteristics become more noticeable, together with an intrusive *r* and occasional stressed diphthongs. Most of the indicated dialect meanings and pronunciations of the *Spectator* survive, like *nary* and the use of *yea* as an intensive, as in *yea high* or *yea far*. The participle is given the initial *a-* as in *a-risin'*, *a-jewin'*, and *a-goin'* regularly. Weak verbs become strong as in *brung*, *druv*, and *clumb*, the last so common a form that it cannot be put down as an illiteracy. And the pronoun *it* frequently and sometimes defiantly becomes *hit* in speech. Of course, on the cultivated level such differences disappear or are largely suppressed, but throughout the rural areas they are heard in common speech. Terms familiar to word lists gathered in Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Cumberlands are encountered often, like *to red up*, *to split the blanket*, *to make garden*, *to work like hell beating tanbark*, *to faunch*, *feisty*, a *gallop* of sweetening (and formerly it might be 'long' or 'short' sweetening), *wapper-jawed*, and *meachin*. The speechways of the pioneers seem to have survived well in the country back from the river.

To the east of the Cascade Mountains and to the south of the Calapooyas is another general speech area, itself divisible into smaller sections. A Southern quality is even more noticeable in pronunciation, for east of the mountains the original Missouri speech was reinforced by large groups of Texans who came in with the cattle industry, by the Copperheads and Secessionists from the Border States, refugees from wrath and conscrip-

tion, and by dispersed Confederate army units. Their speechways were of course marked and survive best in isolated Wallowa County, where an observer reported encountering many of them.<sup>16</sup> It is hardly a problem to the student of language to understand why one county in that region has been politically unwavering in its Democratic faith. Throughout eastern Oregon the speech is slow, but not so slow as in the rural western section, and the pitch is higher, so that around Pendleton it is noticeably high and Southern. To the south the accent becomes general Western, with a slight twang and some nasalization, and in the southwestern corner of the state, the nasalization, in the remote settlements, is strong and has the effect of a slow whine. From the Yoncalla region (pronounced there as *Yan-kally*) comes the comparison *not worth nor a bucket of sour pickles*.

Portland, the major urban center of the state, has no noticeable local characteristic speechway, except for occasional examples of Briticisms. The pronunciations may be from the commercial group which stems from New England, with an admixture of the slightly Scottish vowels found elsewhere, but much of it is probably piously maintained survivals or meticulously acquired habits among the large Anglophilic group in the city. Except for a few local usages for locations and city characteristics, the vocabulary has no marked distinctions. In other parts of the state are examples of local influences from special groups which have thickly settled in limited regions, as have the Scandinavians in several sections, the Finns at Astoria, the Irish at Lakeview, the Germans at Mt. Angel and Aurora, among others. The Basques of eastern Oregon have had no effect upon areas surrounding them.

Oregon has no sharply defined accent and no distinct vocabulary, but it does retain many survivals of the speechways of its original mass settlement, enough to give a slight but definite Southern coloration to the speech. The vocabulary is not uniquely local, but it does strongly reflect its basic industries, either in words or phrases common to the whole industry, or in words with specific local meaning and usage. In general, Oregon has embedded in its speech a history of its development as a frontier area.

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16. See T. Josephine Hausen, 'Wallowa County, Oregon, Expressions,' *American Speech*, VI (February, 1931), 229-30. Most of the usages she found have been reported to me by students from that area.